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Could any MIAs still be alive?

By MARK FINEMAN

FULLY LOADED WITH FUEL, ammunition and a crew of 16, the U.S. Air Force C-130 gunship lifted off into the night from a base in northeastern Thailand, banked to the right and headed toward sector "Steel Tiger" — a secret target in the secret war then raging in Central Laos. The code name of the mission was Spectre 17. The date was Dec. 21, 1972.

At 11,000 feet, Spectre 17 slipped over the pitch-black Mekong River at a point about 30 miles north of Pakse, Laos. Five minutes later, a 35mm anti-aircraft gun began hunting the sky. The shells flashed and pounded all around the C-130. Finally, one found the fuel tank.

When Spectre 17 blew up in midair, Technical Sgt. Richard M. Williams and Sgt. Carl E. Stevens Jr. were blown out the back door. Their parachutes opened automatically. Crewman Joel R. Birch was blown apart immediately. But that is all anyone really knows with certainty about the night Spectre 17 went down, joining so many others on the other side of the Mekong.

About 24 hours after the crash of Spectre 17, Capt. Jerry W. Shipman took off in his Jolly Green 32 helicopter from the same air base in Thailand that launched the Spectre 17 mission. Code-named Spectre 07, Shipman's mission was to search out and rescue any survivors from Spectre 17. Shipman flew low across the Mekong toward coordinates XC 087 086, the place where the C-130 was known to have gone down.

The moon was full. Shipman's Jolly Green was a good target. The 35mm was again firing away down below. Finally, the helicopter radio squawked; the chopper had come within range of Tech. Sgt. Williams' emergency beeper. Shipman homed in on the signal. Williams flashed his emergency strobe light from deep inside the jungle. Shipman spotted it and went down. The ground was six feet deep in jungle vines and roots. Shipman hovered and dropped the cable. Williams strapped it around himself and was pulled up to safety.

Sgt. Stevens wasn't far off. He was hiding under a tree near a clearing. The Jolly Green went down again. The crew pulled Stevens inside. Dodging enemy fire, Shipman went back up to 2,000 feet to search again. There was nothing below but the pounding 35mm gun and the black of the jungle.

On the brief trip back across the Mekong, back into the safety of Thailand, the men talked a bit about what had happened — about the anti-aircraft gun, about the explosion, about the three other parachutes that had emerged after theirs when the C-130 was hit. And for the next 24 hours, Shipman's rescue teams braved the ground artillery to search the area.

In his final report, Capt. Shipman stated, "No other survivors could be raised on the radios and no other strobes could be sighted." And, after extensive interviews with both the survivors and the rescue teams, the Air Force concluded, "They are doubtful there are any other survivors." Yet, in another report written 10 days after the crash of Spectre 17, Air Force investigators stated: "There is no conclusive evidence of death. The possibility of survival still exists."

And 10 years later, the doubts remain: Sixteen men downed in a C-130 gunship over Laos more than a decade ago. Two crewmen rescued. A third known dead. And 13 American servicemen missing in action on the other side of the Mekong River.

They still are. So are 2,481 others — all of them American soldiers who never came home from Southeast Asia, dead or alive. And the story of Spectre 17 remains just one of hundreds of such tales that continue to fuel one of the greatest and most tragic unresolved mysteries in the history of the American military.

A FULL DECADE HAS passed now since the United States withdrew its forces from Vietnam in an effort to end one of the most unsettling and divisive chapters in American history. Never before had a war on foreign soil inflicted such deep and gaping wounds in America's soul, such deep disagreement among its politicians and among its people, such widespread civil violence on its streets and campuses, and such heated debates in its bars and living rooms.

Maybe that is why the chapter of American history that is the Vietnam War refuses to end. Even now, 10 years after the last American C-141 transport left South Vietnam, veterans hospitals across America are filled with "survivors" trying to cope with what they saw. And even now, night stands and old photo albums all over the country are filled with the frozen memories of the 47,000 American soldiers who never had a chance to worry about it.

But perhaps more than anything else, it is that gnawing statistic — those 2,494 American soldiers who never came back home — that has done the most to keep the final chapter of Vietnam an open one. Because, behind that number, there is still the searing, inescapable question: *What if even one of those men — just one — is still alive?*

Even with the missing, the Vietnam War has been uncomfortably different for the United States. In earlier, less divisive wars, there was less demand for a body for every man who didn't come back alive. Until Vietnam, it seemed an accepted part of war that some who fought would not be found. In World War II, for example, 22 percent of the Americans presumed killed were never accounted for; in Vietnam, the comparable figure is less than 6 percent.

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